

# Corvi Chronicle

*Journal of the American Society of Crows and Ravens Vol. XXIV, No. 2, 2009 (C.E.)*

## CORVID INTELLIGENCE



In the July-August issue of *Science Illustrated* (in slick style and appearance as well as title an unabashed imitation of *Sports Illustrated*) there is an article about the “intelligence” of corvids: their self-awareness, abstract decision making, numerical sense and of course tool making, which has been so well publicized in the last few years. Readers of the *Chronicle* will find little new in this article but it provides a summary of recent behavioral investigations, mostly conducted in laboratory situations. However, I find a boldface caption which introduces this report to be exasperating and suspect that so will many ASCAR members. It reads:

“Recent research indicates that corvids, a group that includes crows, ravens and magpies, are just as smart as chimpanzees – sometimes even smarter. These findings have overturned our understanding of nature and evolutionary origins of intelligence and challenge the view that humans are the only thinking animals.”

Firstly, such claims are quite contrary to scientific and historical fact. (It has been some time since there were thinking people who thought animals did not think.) Secondly such nonsense promotes a pernicious bio-chauvinism, which impairs our understanding of other species.

Broadly, intelligence is an attribute of creatures, which enables them to cope successfully with reality. So defined, intelligent behavior seemingly is the product of both endogenetic evolution – natural selection, mutation, etc., – and exogenetic heredity, i.e. learned responses of individuals, which are preserved and passed along within at least certain animal communities. In terms of species, anyone of them, in the niche it occupies, is more “intelligent” than all the others. Nothing is, or can be, smarter

at being a night crawler (*Lumbricus*) than is *Lumbricus*. Even so ranking the intelligence of animals has long excited pop science writers. Are dogs smarter than cats? What about pigs and horses, parrots and two-year-old humans or, as in this case, crows and chimpanzees? Another question – intelligent for what? – mocks answers to such questions.

A Johns Hopkins’ researcher, scornful of the enthusiasm for measuring the I.Q. of other species and treating the results as if they were SAT scores, once remarked, “If Baltimore Orioles administered intelligence tests they would conclude humans were imbeciles because they cannot build nests with their noses.”

Other creatures have come by an infinite number of successful coping responses. The responses of those occupying somewhat similar niches may be somewhat similar but never entirely so. For humans, making decisions, solving problems, advancing our interests rationally is a signature coping strategy. We equate it with intelligence. We measure the intelligence of other creatures by determining the extent to

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which they will or can be induced sometimes to behave somewhat as people do. The ones who do so most frequently and easily are deemed to be smarter than the others.

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Actions of other animals which seem to owe little if anything to intelligence – as we commonly define it – are regarded as intuitive or innate ones predetermined and indelibly fixed by genetic code. However in our own case jealous, territorial, xenophobic and other such reactions are frequently attributed to either traditional wisdom and values or to chronically deranged thinking.

Classifying responses as either intelligent or instinctive may be reasonable enough but attempting to rank them, supposedly according to merit is not. Doing so promotes the notion that intelligent – again as we see it – behavior is of a higher order, more complex and effective, than instinctive behavior. To think of, for example, echolocation, migration, the thigmotaxic responses of shrews, or for that matter *Lumbricus*, as primitive, inefficient, simplistic strategies skews our understanding and appreciation of the world around us. It is unintelligent as well as being a pity.

Alerted by minimal changes in the depth of water and current flow in pools, which they have made, beavers quickly find and begin plugging even very small breeches in their dams. If interested, human technicians could no doubt create an equally dependable early warning system but it probably would require more than a 30-pound device fueled by fresh

*Continued on page 2*

## CORVID INTELLIGENCE *continued*

# Pop science writing rankles

bark. Whether the behavior of beavers is defined as intelligent or instinctive, it is clearly, in the literal meaning of the words, wonder full.

Students of animal behavior have long thought that self-awareness – recognizing themselves as individuals – indicates a human-like intelligence. To test for it, animals of various species have been induced to look into mirrors. Most (including younger than 18 months humans) do not seem to understand they are seeing themselves.

But according to Science Illustrated chimpanzees and corvids (the study birds were magpies) do. In some circumstances this may be a useful ability. Seeing its image in a window pane, a corvid presumably will not – as, say, a cardinal will – repeatedly attack it as a threatening rival. However no being reflection-wise apparently has not handicapped most species. Also while they may not be aware of their own appearance many social animals have need to be and are keenly aware of their other distinguishing, individual characteristics: age, sex, status (alpha, beta, etc.) within the group.

Did humanity suffer a mass self-identity crisis before somebody happened to see their face reflected in a still body of water, perhaps a beaver pond? Is vanity an intelligence marker?

A related corvid aside: Even when the birds may be close neighbors or frequent visitors, many people cannot -- or at least do not -- distinguish one crow from another because as the old sour saying goes, "They all look exactly alike." But anyone who has had a companion crow (or for that matter tried to trap or hunt them) knows these birds quickly, without much study, identify individual people, remember and react to them as such.

A companion crow of my acquaintance who went by the name of "Hello" was raised and imprinted as a foundling. Before she drifted off to join her own kind, Hello was around the premises, in



SELF PORTRAIT by Corvi 444 of Ashford, Wash., who also sent the Chronicle an account of ravens playing a game of "hide the stick." Read the story in Roost Notes on page 8.

and out of the house – when windows of opportunity occurred – for about five months. She was fed, protected and entertained by the people who lived with her on the place and also a good few visitors. For unfathomable crow reasons she variously tolerated, exploited, teased and doted on certain people. Two grand-

daughters, one 10 and the other 12 years old, were frequent playmates and Hello, in effect, named them using a distinctive vocalization when one or the other of them appeared.

On the other hand when a friend stopped by one day, Hello immediately became agitated and began, perched on a low sycamore limb, to curse him as if he were an owl or a snake. Then to the astonishment of everyone she swooped down, lit on his head and began fiercely pecking at it. After being shooed off she returned to the attack, driving the friend into the house. Only after the crow had flown off to attend to business elsewhere did it seem safe for him to escape to his car. For experimental reasons he returned a week or so later but did not stay because the crow immediately displayed the same belligerent behavior, which in our experience was unique and mystifying. There was nothing unusual, certainly not threatening, about either the appearance or behavior of this friend. The episode brought to mind the folk verse:

*I do not like thee Dr. Fell  
Oh why, oh why I cannot tell.*

When they appear to be somewhat similar to our own, we tend to patronize, even disparage the cognitive skills and strategies of other creatures. Yes, yes, of course, ravens counting to six; magpies recognizing themselves in mirrors is interesting and entertaining, sort of cute because after all they are dumb beasts. Crows making simple little tools starts you to thinking about how high we have risen. Some of the little things they can do are impressive but that doesn't change the fact that we are the Ultimate Model, the Lords of Creation or Evolution.

Fermenting sour grapes may be at work here. For millenniums it was commonly, academically, theologically accepted as an indisputable truth that we were THE Thinking Animal. During the past century or so zoological observation has made it plain that we indisputably are

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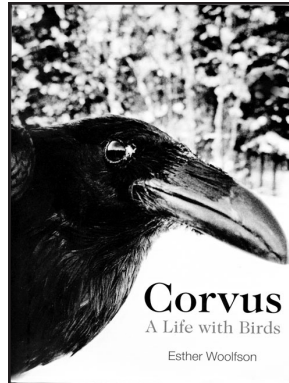
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# BOOKS

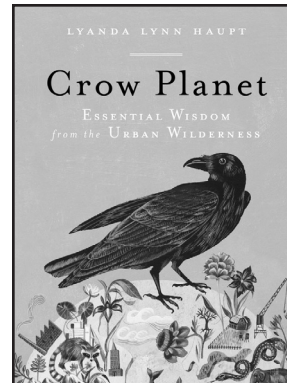
## Recommended reading

The Chronicle strongly recommends that ASCAR members obtain, read and keep two excellent, recently published books. They are: *Corvus, A Life with Birds* by Esther Woolfson and *Crow Planet, Finding Our Place in Zoopolis* by Lyanda Lynn Haupt. Both books are accurate and instructive in regards the abilities and behaviors of various corvid species. Both offer entertaining, thought-and-speculation provoking anecdotal observations. But these are not at all competitive or duplicative books; have quite different purposes and themes. A sometimes novelist and essayist, Woolfson, uses her considerable literary talents to write about companion "crows," (i.e. corvids) and their specific impact on her life. Haupt, a professional wildlife biologist, focuses on the ecological impact of crows as one of the presently preeminent invigorated species.

Woolfson takes up the more complex and difficult subject: the ancient but still



mystifying yearning of humans to know other bloods. In the first chapter of her book she writes: "The corvids, the rook, magpie and crow, have altered forever my relationship to the rest of the world, altered my view of a hierarchy of form, intellect, ability; my concept of time." She suggests that corvids who have made their fortune, so to speak, watching and exploiting people, provide, as truly wild things, one of the best opportunities to satisfy this yearning. (Dogs may form closer emotional bonds but in the pro-



cess have become thoroughly domesticated.)

A canary monitoring air quality in a mine has long been used to dramatize the unfortunate impact of human activity on other creatures. (Presently a polar bear on a melting ice field is more often used for the same purpose.) In a different, seldom-considered way, Haupt cites the current prosperity of corvids to make the same

point. They are doing very well mainly because of their ability to exploit and adapt to people. Our activities and behaviors have created new resources and better habitat for them; allowed these birds to increase in numbers and range, expand their niches often at the expense of more specialized, less adaptive animals.

Again – read, enjoy and be improved by these two books. Among other things they partially explain the existence of ASCAR and the Corvi Chronicle.

## CORVID INTELLIGENCE *continued*

### *Traditional Values Lab poses fresh perspectives*

A Thinking Animal. In many quarters this re-definition is still regarded as an insulting demotion.



Good quips aside, Baltimore Orioles probably don't give a lot of thought to their own intelligence or that of others. They seem to be more like specialized technicians than ponderers. However, for some perspective, consider the following:

✎ An investigation of both species, conducted by the Traditional Values Lab at Corvi College has found that 79.6 [per cent] of American crows studied mate for life and remain monogamous. In comparison 36.4 percent of the studied American people do so. TVC scientists speculate that this discrepancy may reflect the fact that while many other social species have developed so-called "lust control" responses, humans remain

sexually active throughout the year. Among crows all adulterous episodes were heterosexual as were nearly two-thirds of those involving mated people.

✎ "Corvi College prof believes "avian envy" may cause people to jump from tall buildings and bridges when stressed. Calls [the] urge atavistic and irrational."

✎ The sensual acuity and memory of several kinds of animals has been recently studied at Corvi College. While individuals of the species being tested observed, scientists scattered "reward baits" in two acres of an unmowed hayfield. Coyotes and crows both, surprisingly, retrieved 98.2 percent of these rewards. The success rate of other tested creatures was: gray squirrels, 80.4 percent; pigs, 71.6 percent; raccoons, 64.0 percent; Sandhill cranes,

47.1 percent; chimpanzees, 38.6 percent; humans (volunteer graduate students) 31.0 percent; turkeys, 21.4 percent; and Shetland ponies, 17.6 percent. Two Siamese cats and a Gray parrot could not be induced to participate in the experiment.

✎ The Intra-Specific Relations Institute of Corvi College has found no evidence of violence or abuse among some 20,000 crows congregated in a nighttime roost. A similar-sized group of humans was observed in mid-summer on a strip of ocean beach. Within it between twilight and dawn, there were 321 angry confrontations, 112 tantrums (both childish and adult), 76 physical assaults, 12 attempted and six accomplished robberies; four rapes and one death which remains under investigation as a possible homicide. – *Corvi 43, Michigan*



# Oops *crow research story missing facts*

The following note was published in the Dec. 14, 2008, issue of the New York Times Magazine.

**VENDING MACHINE FOR CROWS.** In June, Josh Klein revealed his master's-thesis project to a flock of crows at the Binghamton Zoo in south-central New York State. The New York University graduate student offered the birds coins and peanuts from a dish attached to a vending machine he'd created, then took the peanuts away. Klein designed the machine so that when the crows searched for the missing peanuts, they pushed the coins out of a dish into a slot, causing more peanuts to be released into the dish. The Binghamton crows quickly learned that dropping nickels and dimes into the slot produced peanuts, and the most resourceful members of the flock began looking for more coins. Within a month, Klein had a flock of crows scouring the ground for loose change.

Now Klein is working with graduate students at Cornell University and Binghamton University to study how wild crows make use of his machine. Although his invention might conjure Hitchcock-worthy visions of crows stealing the loose change from pedestrians' pockets and hands, Klein's conception is more benign. To Klein, the machine demonstrates the value of cooperating with "synanthropes" – animals that have adapted seamlessly to human environments. "Rather than just killing off a species, why not see if they can do something useful for us, so we can all live in close proximity?" he said. To pursue his research, he founded the Synanthropy Foundation this year. Someday, he hopes, similar techniques may allow us to train rats to sort our garbage for us. CLAIRE TRAGESER

In 2009, the NY Times Magazine published an Editor's Note, which reads as follows:  
An article in the Year in Ideas issue on Dec. 14, 2008,

reported on Josh Klein, whose master's thesis for New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program proposed "a vending machine for crows" that would enable the birds to exchange coins for peanuts. The article reported that beginning in June 2008, Klein tested the machine at the Binghamton Zoo, that the crows learned how to use it and that after a month the crows were actually scouring the ground for loose change.

The Times has since learned that Klein was never at the Binghamton Zoo, and there were no crows on display there in June 2008. He performed these experiments with captive crows in a Brooklyn apartment; he told the reporter about the Brooklyn crows but implied that his work with them was preliminary to the work at the zoo. Asked to explain these discrepancies, Klein now says he and the reporter had a misunderstanding about the zoo.

The reporter never called the zoo in Binghamton to confirm. And while the fact-checker did discuss the details with Klein, he did not call the zoo, as required under the The Time's fact-checking standards. In addition the article said that Klein was working with graduate students at Cornell University and Binghamton University to study how wild crows make use of his machine, which does exist. Klein did get a professor at Binghamton to help him try it out twice in Ithaca, with assistance from a Binghamton graduate student, and it was not a success. Corvid experts who have since been interviewed have said that Klein's machine is unlikely to work as intended.

These discrepancies were pointed out to The Times by the Binghamton professor several weeks after the article was published; this editors' note was delayed for additional reporting. These details should have been discovered during the reporting and editing process. Had that happened, the article would not have been published.

## REACH BACK DEPARTMENT...*early corvi encounters*

We recently ran across photos of two former companion crows who favored ASCAR branchers as perches. The crows left within the year each had been found outside their nests by adult corvi. The branchers, Corvi 18 (left) and Corvi 17, have since matured, are gainfully employed and settled into their own nests. They flew on to colleges, met potential mates and explored employment and other options beyond their



original roosts.

Corvi 18 and Corvi 818 married in Italy on Aug. 8, 2008. They celebrated their



first anniversary stateside this summer with a wedding party for family and friends from roosts along East Coast fly-

ways and beyond. Most had not been able to attend the wedding festivities in Italy.

Corvi 17 and Corvi 727 celebrated their fourth wedding anniversary in June with their two-year-old brancher Corvi 2117.

Corvi 17 recently completed a degree in social work and is employed in the Fairfax County, Va., school system. Corvi 18 team teaches in a Carrboro, N.C., rural school and is working on a master's degree in exceptional children education, once known as special education.



## THE TALK OF THE ROOST

### ASSOCIATION OF OLD CROWS

We learned the Strategic Air Command not only has an Association of Old Crows but that crows and ravens are part of their military lore. Thanks to a corvi in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs we obtained a photo of a Strategic Air Command patch featuring a cigar smoking crow grasping lightening bolts. The VA corvi set out to learn more about the insignia and its purpose and sent explanations provided by two Air Force veterans.

One wrote, "The cigar-smoking [Strategic Air Command] crow was the province of the electronic combat community, and was often worn by B-52 EW (Electronic Warfare) officers. The underlying bundle of lightning bolts represented ECM ("jamming" to the uninitiated).

The crow had for some years been a critter associated with electronic warfare (cf. the international Association of Old Crows). "Every Crow a Tiger" was a long-standing motto of bomber EW

officers, sometimes printed with this emblem when it was used on walls or podiums – hence the tiger tail.



Another veteran wrote, "The SAC Crow patches most likely represent the mission of the Electronic Warfare Officer (EWO) on the crew. He operated radar jamming as well as radar homing and warning equipment on the aircraft. A nickname for the EWO is 'Raven.' Most all EWOs belong to the Association of Old Crows. The crow on the patch signifies the work that the EWOs do on the many varied missions of SAC and other commands (ACC including several special [operations] missions now)."

### TWO RAVENS

Corvi 2304 in Yukon Territory, Canada sent photos and the following tale of two ravens.

This is a funny experience I watched among my raven friends, who frequently come and visit my workshop roof to pick up food scraps my wife and I throw out for them.

Last summer, one raven, whom we called Parvi (after Luciano Pavarotti) as he was sitting frequently in a close by tree and holding a solo concert of the most unimaginable sounds, became tamer than his buddies, hopping close to two feet towards me, when I offered him some dried dog food. I say "him," as he showed all the signs of a male raven, slipping into the typical mating behavior during his concerts, fluffing up his feathers, in particular his "ears" and "beard," dodging down a bit while flapping his unsprung wings.

He also showed a lot of self-con-

fidence around our cats, sitting next to them, sometimes only a foot apart. The cats seemed to be more nervous about his presence than vice versa. One day he appeared with a buddy, a raven somewhat bigger than Parvi and a lot shyer. We ended up calling him Borris, as he behaved like a Tolstoy description of a typical Russian farmer, big, strong, good-natured and a bit simple-minded.

It is well known that adolescent ravens hang out together in gangs for the first five to seven years of their lives, before serious pair bonding begins. During this time they "practice" mating rituals, showing off dominance behavior etc., very similar to our teenagers.

One day, Parvi and Borris were sitting in a tree together, Borris suddenly started the male mating show, as described above and began moving closer to Parvi. He, definitely surprised and somewhat dismayed, started to move away from Borris, until the branch they were sitting on became too thin and Parvi flew away and landed on the gable of my house. Borris followed and continued his love dance, more and more intensely as Parvi kept moving away from him along the gable end of the roof. What is elusive becomes so much more desirable. It was a tragic comical scene, watching lovesick Borris pursuing his unresponsive target of desire.

Finally, Parvi, having reached the end of the gable, started to show signs of aggression towards

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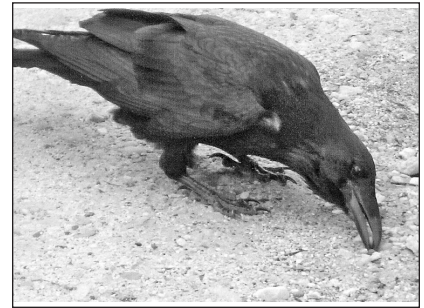




Above Parvi and Borris; far right Parvi picks up kibble; center Parvi and Tigerlina check out who will use the ramp first to enter the open loft window.



## TALK continued



Borris and then took off. Borris of course followed.

They both kept coming for visits throughout the summer but whenever Borris started his courting business, Parvi backed away or even pecked at Borris, as to say, "I am your buddy, but no hanky panky."

I left the Yukon for a few months last winter and so lost sight of them.

Parvi came for a few visits this year but without Borris.

Perhaps he could no longer endure his unanswered love. – *Corvi 2304, Dawson City, Yukon Territory, Canada*

## Art Notes

Linocut artist and book illustrator Evon Zerbetz, who has kindly permitted the Chronicle to use her work numerous times in issues over the years, tells us she has been busy this year in her Ketchikan, Alaska, studio working on both large and small scale pieces and projects beyond her studio.

The largest piece in progress is a five-foot carved block that will become a mural for a 36-foot trailer housing a traveling museum style exhibit promoting wilderness refuges on the Connecticut River. This is the largest carved block that Zerbetz has created and it includes Atlantic salmon, sturgeon, eastern pip-strelle bat, starry nose mole, black ducks, dragonflies, Canadian warbler, fireflies and other creatures of the northeast.



Linocut by Evon Zerbetz

In comparison, her smallest recent project was designing a wine label for Minke Merlot the newest wine to be served at the Sitka Whalefest, Nov. 6 to 8 (we noted the Whalefest Fundraising

Banquet also serves Killer Cabernet and Whalesong Syrah). Zerbetz writes that she plans to attend and hang out with scientists to observe humpback whales.

Readers of the October issue of Alaska magazine will recognize Zerbetz' linocuts illustrating a whimsical report on wood and warmth in the Alaska lifestyle. Other projects include a 30-foot wall installation for a school in Gustavus, Alaska, and a series of work for a new Veterans Administration clinic in Anchorage. To view her work visit her Web site at [www.evonzerbetz.com](http://www.evonzerbetz.com)

## Art cache

Through the years many excellent artists have contributed much appreciated drawings and sketches to the Chronicle. Harry Lowe, an obviously cultured ASCAR member, is a sometimes collector of corvid related *objets d'art*. He writes to ask:

"Are you [the Chronicle] interested in building a library of crow images?... Do you have or do you know of a library, museum or gallery that addresses that?"

In answer; Yes. This is an excellent idea whose time should come. No. We do not. In fact the Chronicle staff often has difficulty keeping track of phone numbers, keys and even small pieces of paper. No. We do not know of a trustworthy repository for corvid artworks. Does anybody else? Again there should be one.

## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

## Tokyo's crow control plan bombs

A July 26, 2009, Washington Post report on Tokyo's eight-year, \$5.3 million war on crows by Blaine Harden caught our eye.

Harden reported that despite trapping and exterminating 105,392 crows in Tokyo, "the number of crows has grown 33 percent in the past three years, foiling the Tokyo metropolitan government's war on crows." The \$5.3 million for crow control amounted to about \$50 per dead crow. Some Japanese crow experts theorize that the older, wiser crows elude traps and that collecting garbage at night would better serve to reduce the city's crow population.

The resurgence of crows is blamed for sabotaging the city's high-speed Internet network among other things.

"Besides...ripping open plastic garbage bags, scaring children in parks, pooping on passersby -- crows have been sabotaging the city's high-speed Internet network. Hundreds of fiber-optic cables have been slashed open by crows scrounging high-tech stuffing for their nests. The birds are also blamed for periodic blackouts. At least one has been implicated in shutting off power to a bullet train in northern Japan.

"These are jungle crows (*Corvus macrorhynchos*), and they are bigger, bad-

der and uglier than their kin in North America. They weigh in at about 1 1/2 pounds and have a yard-wide wingspan. They can clench their claws into fists and punch people in the head, local bird experts say. They sometimes dive-bomb Tokyoites from the rear, with an unnerving whoosh that has been known to cause people to crash their bicycles or fall down stairwells."

Tokyo's war on crows began after a crow dive-bombed Shintaro Ishihara, "the often irascible, exceedingly powerful governor of Tokyo, while he was playing golf" in 2001. He declared he intended "to make crow-meat pies Tokyo's special dish."

Crows were caught in traps baited with mayonnaise or lard; gassed with carbon

**"THE ONLY EFFECTIVE AND HUMANE WAY TO LIMIT CROWS IN TOKYO IS TO GET MORE SERIOUS ABOUT GARBAGE."**

**LOCAL BIRD EXPERTS SAY THESE CROWS CAN CLENCH THEIR CLAWS INTO FISTS AND PUNCH PEOPLE IN THE HEAD.**

monoxide; and cremated in one of the city's many high-efficiency garbage incinerators.

"At the same time, ward governments in Tokyo distributed hundreds of thousands of blue mesh nylon tarps. Residents were instructed never to put plastic gar-

bage bags outside unless they were covered with the supposedly crow-proof blankets."

Crow complaints fell by 80 percent until three years ago.

"Fatigue set in ... Crow traps got old and were not replaced. Because of budget cuts, bait portions in traps were reduced, the Asahi newspaper reported. The paper also alleged that the city skimped on mayonnaise to save money, but Tokyo officials insist that crows like lard just as much as they like mayonnaise."

The city's top crow control officer attributed trapping fewer crows in 2006 to "going through a transitional phase that year." Furthermore Tokyo residents had become less conscientious about their garbage and their blue blankets. Finally, the official complained, governments on the outskirts of Tokyo had not

done their part consequently suburban crows commute into the city at mealtimes.

Harden reported: "Many bird experts disagreed. They say Tokyo is losing control of the crow situation because it underestimates the intelligence of the birds and overestimates its ability to control their numbers through extermination.

"The older, more clever crows never go near those traps," said Hiroshi Kawachi, an official with the Wild Bird Society of Japan. "They are catching only young, stupid crows, not the breeders."

"Kawachi said smarter crows have figured out the blue tarps: They lift them up and then eat the garbage.

"The only effective and humane way to limit crows in Tokyo is to get more serious about garbage, said Kawachi, who for a year counted crows eating trash in the upscale Ginza district.

"He found that when Ginza restaurants agreed to have their garbage collected at night, rather than in the late morning, after crows eat breakfast, the birds' numbers declined by half. ...

"Meanwhile, the city is not backing down from the fight. As well as encouraging residents to be more vigilant with their blue blankets, it is putting out more traps, well-baited with lard."

ASCAR now numbers — so think some who enjoy counting things — about 900 members. Alphabetically and in terms of interests and attitudes members range — an expression — from academics to Zoroastrians. But only the Editor and an associate minion know who and where they all are. This is in keeping with the Corvi Privacy Act that forbids those who know from talking about or to other corvis or using their names and addresses in the

## Privacy act

Chronicle without permission. The CPA is occasionally tested by purveyors of crow curios wanting access to mailing lists.

However, because many members have similar interests and have indicated a desire to make the acquaintance of others who share them, some thought has been given to adjust-

ing the CPA to accommodate these wishes. Therefore anyone who would like to hear from other corvi should send along their name and address to the editor. These will be published occasionally in the Chronicle. Names are not absolutely necessary — Corvi numbers will do — but addresses are. Obviously those who wish to remain known only to the editor and her associate minion should do nothing and will continue to enjoy the protection of CPA.

# ROOST NOTES

*crows calling each to each*

The Crow Woman of Roscoe Street, as she chose to make herself known, was a long-time resident of Southside Chicago and a valued Chronicle correspondent. She is still the latter but recently re-located to a small town in her native Wisconsin and adopted a new *nom de plume*. From there the former CWRS writes:

## IT TAKES A FLOCK

Somewhere around the end of May, I think it was, I was out in the backyard digging holes when I heard a crow call and then another. Seems a gang was gathering in the huge mulberry across the street. More and more flew in, perching high in the tree, wobbling a little on the upper branches. There was a good deal of chat back and forth and then I heard another sound that I associate with distress, so I abandoned the holes and walked over to the edge of my yard to see if someone were in trouble. The call was that odd, “Aw maw,” thing they do, kind of drawn out and lugubrious. I looked the tree over carefully. There were crows jammed into that tree all the way to the top and there were three youngsters perched, precariously, it seemed on three bouncy lower branches. It was this trio that was calling “Aw maw, maaaaw, aw maaaaw.”

The crows in the upper branches sat quietly then, watching the trio below. Then a single barked “Caw!” sounded and one of the youngsters let go the branch and flew. It wasn’t a great flight and it wasn’t all ebon grace. It was pretty messy, to tell the truth.

Then several of the other big guys started shouting at the remaining two and finally, after much cawing and much aw-mawing, a second pup took off all raggedy-like, landing on the lawn over there.

That left only one and that one wasn’t going anywhere, thank you, was planning to spend the night it seemed. It gave one more “Aw maw” and then shut up and firmed up his grip on the branch. Lord, but that set the whole tree to hollering. The adults were shouting and crabbing and some, I think, were swearing, too. All to no avail. There was a fluttering and fussing about and many of the big ones changed places and came down lower to get a better look, get closer for the cussing. The youngster didn’t budge. Then one of the old uncles took matters into his own talons and bounced down on the branch where the fledgling clung. It dislodged the kid and he flew. The tree shouted in triumph and moments later, everyone flew away. – *The Crow Woman of River and Third*

## POST STORM CALLS

Thank you for the Vol. XXIII, No. 3, issue of the Corvi Chronicle. In response to the stories of apparent crow mourning, I am writing to tell you of two most unusual occurrences regarding a small (six or so) group of fish crows who have taken up residence in the woods just north of my home. Please share this with my fellow Corvi.

In the spring of 2007, shortly after I moved into my home, the crows began to be frequent visitors to my neighborhood. They have continued to visit up to the present, making

many low level chases through the trees and, in the spring, making many trips to the oak trees immediately behind my house. One of more of them would break off twigs and small limbs to carry a short distance away to a more forested area. They were also observed carrying food to their area.

On June 2, 2007, and again on May 20, 2009, strong winds and rainstorms buffeted the area all day. In early afternoon on both occasions the crows began calling in continuous, muted tones.

They were still calling at 3 a.m. in 2007 (13 hours) and until 9 a.m. (19 hours) this year. The calls were unlike any crow calls I have ever heard before – not fear, alarm, begging nor sentinel, just a soft, monotone – cah, cah, cah – from at least three different voices.

Were they grieving, distressed that their nests had been destroyed and nestlings drowned? – *Corvi 5107, Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.*

## DECONSTRUCTION

A resident of the Capitol Hill area in Washington, D.C. sends along a thought-provoking clipping from HillRag, a free publication distributed in that neighborhood. It is based on the observations of Christine and Victor Romero, who say they regularly walk their dog in the Congressional Cemetery. According to the Romeros – as reported – a Bald Eagle began building a nest early in March 2009 in a tree in the cemetery. It grew to be a sizable structure but after a few weeks the eagle abandoned it. The bird was last seen at the nest site on March 20. On the morning of March 28 a flock of a dozen or so crows descended on the nest and energetically began to dismantle it as if it were a neighborhood eyesore or something which violated local zoning codes. Eventually the crows – while continuing to vocalize loudly – reduced the eagle’s nest to about one third of its original size. They then went on their way.

## RAVENS GOT STICK GAME!

Corvi 444 in Ashford, Wash., sends this observation of ravens at play:

A friend recently sent me photographs that she took of two young Ravens engaged in a game of Hide-the-Stick. I am encouraging her to submit them to one of the esteemed researchers of our breed, perhaps John Marzluff or the great Bernd Heinrich himself. I would present them here, but for that sticky issue of ownership. Hence, I will simply have to describe the game to you as it was played out.

The game was played by two youngsters, identifiable as such by traces of pink evident in the gape flanges. One of the two had in his beak a stick three or four inches long, perhaps a half an inch in diameter, which was repeatedly banged on the ground in front of the companion. The “game master” would then turn away, lay the stick on the ground and SIT on it, belly and tail feathers completely covering it as if sitting on eggs.

*Continued on page 9*



## ROOST NOTES *continued*

### Got stick game

The companion would circle, looking for the stick (maybe long for some portion of it which was left visible?) and when it was not found, the game master would repeat the banging-on-the-ground portion of the sequence, only to sit on it again. Eventually, the second bird was able to retrieve the stick, whereupon it was carried around in a proud display of success.

Myself, I have been privileged to see a Raven perform a double barrel-roll and a pair play at Wing-tag but I would give my eyeteeth for the opportunity to witness in person what my friend photographed. How little we understand these intelligent folk whose air we share!

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## BEST JOURNAL

Dear ASCAR

Your Corvi Chronicle is the best scientific journal ever. I am sending a check to show my appreciation for the association and to make good on the goodwill of [the corvi] who introduced me to the society. 1769, Laytonville, Calif.

## CORVID SUPERIORITY

Dear Corvis

I feel honored having seen my letter posted in the #1 Spring 2009 issue of the Chronicle. I'm enclosing an article further illustrating corvid superiority to most other species. Of course, we already knew that!

The corvi number I would like is: 142857. Should you misplace this secret information, it's actually, one-seventh. - #142857, Bellingham, Wash.

EDITOR'S NOTE: the article enclosed was from the October 2007 issue of Smithsonian magazine under the heading "Wild Things: Life as we know it," a collection of news briefs that included a reference to New Zealand research with New Caledonian crows. Six of seven birds tested used a



Illustration by Jim Haynes

## LETTERS

short stick provided by the researchers to access yet a longer stick to reach a meaty treat. The study was also reported in more detail by the BBC and is online <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/6948446.stm>

## UNSUBSCRIBING

Dear Corvi Chronicle

Please take my name off your mailing list. I have enjoyed your publication for several years, mostly due to the published observations of individuals about their experiences with crows and ravens, and also reports of the results of various research about these amazing birds' intelligence, social integration, etc.

However, I find less of those sorts of materials in your more recent newsletters. Some of the content is "further out" than I am interested in, and some of the letters and articles are so poorly written that I find them grueling to read.

My best to you, however, and to the continued success of Corvi

Chronicle. Again, thank you for ending my subscription to the Chronicle. --  
*Pennsylvania roost*

## FABLE CONFIRMED

A well-known fable traditionally attributed to Aesop tells of a

thirsty raven that dropped stones into a pitcher until the water level had risen high enough so that he could drink. Actually, a "Fable of Aesop" was a generic term for any anecdote, especially involving animals, in the ancient world. That particular story comes from the Natural History of Pliny the Elder. The moral usually appended is now even more famous than the tale itself - "necessity is the mother of invention."

At any rate, when I began studying animal fables, most writers assumed the tale was impossible, but I had a feeling that it was probably true. For a few decades, I have been waiting for confirmation, and now that has finally been accomplished. In a recent experiment by British scientists, a rook figured out how to reach a floating worm by dropping stones into a tube. The story is at:

*Continued on page 10*

The Corvi Chronicle is published irregularly by corvi who have an interest in or need for doing so for members of The American Society of Crows and Ravens and others. There is no subscription fee, but it is customary and seems to send contributions to pay for production and mailing. There is a direct connection between contributions, the size of the Chronicle and its frequency of distribution. Those who do not choose to contribute will continue to receive the Chronicle and enjoy all membership privileges. However, they will no doubt suffer a loss of self-esteem and may occasionally be mocked by other corvis.

Members are reminded to make new corvi by duplicating and passing along issues of the Chronicle.

ASCAR has a home page or chat room on the Internet:

<http://www.ascaronline.org/>

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The Chronicle accepts articles and manuscripts of reasonable length on any topic acknowledged by The Board, news clippings and general correspondence. Unused material will be returned in good time to the authors. Commentary (insightful, indignant or otherwise) should be addressed to:

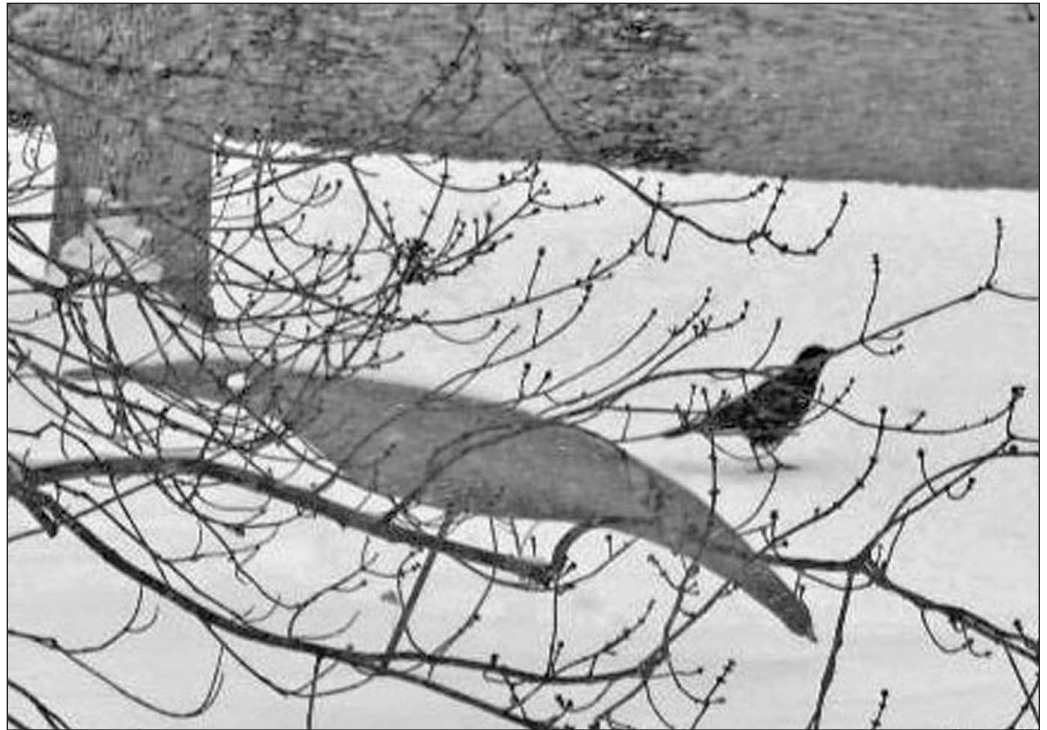
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## LETTERS *continued*

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/8181233.stm>  
My best to all -- Boria Sax

### PUNNY CORVI

A recent issue of the Corvi Chronicle caw[ght] my interest. I am impressed by it's high flying hyperbole, stunning production values and pithy commentary. Your publication is one to crow about and I am delighted to pen this rave[n] review. Please number me as a new ASCAR member. -- 2012, Newtown, Conn.



**Opposing views.** A lone crow walks past a heron sculpture in melting snow this spring in search of corn and seed tossed out daily for birds near a stream in Michigan. Photo by Ky Gilbert.

### CORVI CHRONICLE

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